

A Journey Down Surplus Street

By DEBORA BABIN KATZ

PART IV: THE SEAFARERS

As we continue our journey down Surplus Street, we arrive at three houses all built by Brewsters. This family represents the seafaring class of the 1800s. Their well-built Cape Cod homes with hand hewn timber frames are historical treasures and a legacy of this pathway once known only as 'the road' or 'way to the Meeting House'. A pathway can produce more than just dustbowl. It can contribute to the success of its residents and those who travel along its well-worn tracks. Every foundation, beam and peg found along its way could tell a tale - the tale of an ancient cart path, its people and the enterprises that sustained them.

Joseph Brewster House 23 Surplus Street

This charming, restored cape style home returns us to the days of shipbuilding. Joseph Brewster, a prosperous shipwright, built his house some time between 1802 and 1808. He built it for his wife, Sara Hunt whom he married on December 28th, 1802. Brewster bought the lot for \$80 from his father-in-law Lot Hunt whose farm abutted part of the property.

It is interesting to note how the house sits facing the east unlike most of the other homes, which faced onto Surplus Street. It is possible the house faced this direction onto a lane, which would have led to his father-in-law Lot Hunt's farm and homestead.

Brewster's ability to increase his land holdings is an indication he was successful in his profession as a shipbuilder. His skills also show in the construction of his lovely cape home. In 1838, Brewster increased his property by buying some neighboring land from his father-in-law. The same year he also bought a piece of bayside property previously owned by Nathaniel Cushing.

Along with his prosperity came a large family -- a total of ten children who all grew up in the cape home. During the time the house was built, Joseph and Sara had three children, Eunice born in 1804, Joseph born 1805, and Samuel who was born in 1807. Two years later, Emerson came, then the twins, Sara and Nancy, were born on July 21st 1810. William was born in 1812, Asa on December 18, 1815, Jane two years later and then a second Eunice in 1818.

Not surprisingly, the original keeping room housed a large double oven fireplace with a 46-by-24 inch wide stove and another 10-by-24 inch stove used to cook the many meals Sara Hunt Brewster would have needed to feed her ten children and husband.

The Brewsters were a close knit family. Their oldest son, Joseph Jr. built his



house in 1828 not far from the family homestead on part of the family's land, and Asa, a younger brother, bought land and built a home across from his parent's place on Surplus Street.

Around 1833, a large two-story barn was "melded to the Cape." A more recent renovation of this space now provides a new large kitchen and second floor bedroom. The privy was moved to the east-side of the barn addition and converted into a bath and laundry room. "Old hand hewn beams and joining pegs are visible in this section of the house," noted Ann and Kevin Mullins, the current owners of the Joseph Brewster House.

In April 1847, after the death of Joseph Brewster senior at age 68 years old, Joseph Brewster Jr. obtained ownership of his house which had been built on part of his parents homestead along with 60 rods of land after paying his siblings \$450. In the previous month, Joseph had accepted \$500 from Asa and his sisters for his share in his father's estate. His younger sister Sara continued to live in the house with her daughter Eunice until 1856.

For 66 years the house remained in the Brewster family until 1868 when Joseph Jr. sold it for \$800 to the Reverend Bartholomew Otheman and his wife Abbie.

Fortunately many of the home's original treasures remain. Wide pine floors, some 14 inches wide, are found throughout the traditional center entrance. The original fireplaces, wainscoting, windows, Christian paneled doors along with a "bourning room and small closet on the south side of the house remain unchanged," added Mullins.



The Joseph Brewster House owned by Ann and Kevin Mullins who appropriately named their dog Brewster. Photo by MOORE BANA

Asa & Lydia Brewster House 26 Surplus Street

Jonathan Gross, a coffin maker living in the Major Thomas house, now 14 Surplus Street, sold a parcel of his land to Asa and Lydia Drew Brewster on March 14, 1853.

Town Historian Asa was most likely lured to the sea by his father the shipwright, as many young men in town were during this time period.

As Duxbury men looked to the sea as a way to provide for their families, the shipbuilding, fishing and the trade

roads to the shipyards," noted Pillsbury.

The peak of Duxbury's shipping industry was from 1820 to 1840, and the town "was thoroughly given to the sea and related industries," said Dorothy Wentworth.

One can gain a better glimpse into this seafaring world from records maintained during those two decades. According to the County Atlas of 1839 for example, there were 46 vessels employed in the cod and mackerel fishery in Duxbury in 1837. The value of codfish and mackerel for the year was \$55,548 of codfish and \$14,000 of mackerel. The number of vessels built that same year was 71 and their total value given was \$845,240 with a total of 897 men employed.

Asa must have done well for himself as a fisherman based on the fact he was able to buy his own land and build a beautiful Greek Revival with lovely columns supporting the front porch. Unlike his parents, Joseph and Sara Hunt Brewster, he and his wife Lydia were not able to fill their house with many children. Tragedy struck in 1857 when the couple's only son, George, died of scarlet fever at the age of 16.

Lydia and Asa remained in their beautiful Greek Revival home for the rest of their lives. In a 1859 Report of the Selectmen, their house was assessed for \$1,100 which was one of the highest in the district at that time.

Asa died in 1874 at the age of 59 and Lydia passed on in June of 1887. Her death marked the end of Brewster



(Above): The Asa and Lydia Brewster House today. (Below): The Brewster House in 1935.

Photo by DEBORA BABIN KATZ



Photo Courtesy of David CASEY

Asa was the 8th child of Joseph and Sara Brewster who lived directly across from the property. Like his older brother, Joseph Jr., he was a fisherman by trade. "In Duxbury fishing, like farming, was a family business," wrote Katherine Pillsbury, the

industries prospered -- shaping the town, its activities, and its pathways.

"Transportation patterns began changing. The old west-to-east cart paths which the farmers had taken to the salt marshes now became

ownership in the house and its association with a seafarer family.

The house was then sold to William James Alden Jr. or Willy as he was known in Duxbury. "He had grown up just across the street at 33 Surplus Street," noted David Corey the current owner of the Asa and Lydia Brewster House.

Alden was born in 1845, and was single and 42 years old when he purchased the house. When his mother Lydia Woodward died in 1892, Alden decided it was time to settle down and get married.

"He got himself a mail-order bride, Maria Jones of Waltham," said Corey. The

Joseph Brewster Jr. House 47 Surplus Street

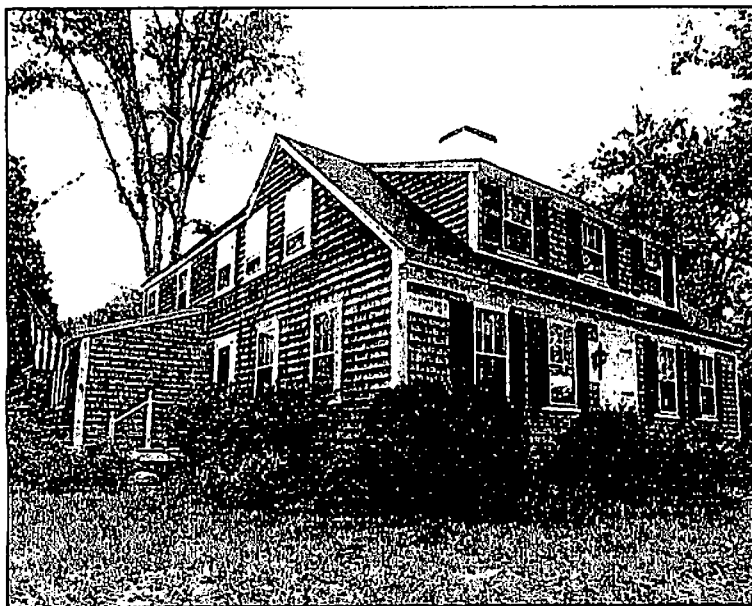
In 1828, at age 23, Joseph Brewster, Jr. married Almira Barker. His father Joseph Brewster provided a piece of the family land along Surplus Street so the couple could build their own home as they were expecting their first child. There is no deed for this transaction, only a family agreement, which was common practice in those days.

Joseph Jr. built a compact Cape similar to his parent's house, but he faced it to the street instead, said Bea Richards.

Richards purchased the Joseph Jr. House in 1943 with her husband Pete, the director of Clapp Laboratories located



Bea Richards in the original keeping room of the Joseph Brewster, Jr. House.



The Joseph Brewster, Jr. House built in 1828. PHOTO BY MICHELLE BAZZ

couple had one son, Fredrick Jones Alden.

About the time that Willy Alden got married, his father, William James Alden, who was living just across the street, decided to sell his house and move in with the couple. Both Alden and his father were shoemakers and his Dad moved his small shop off the property at 33 Surplus Street and onto the back of Willy's yard, noted Corey.

Part of the original front yard fence contains an interesting reminder of their family business. "There is a section of the fence that lifts out and was wide enough for a cart to be wheeled through and up to the back of the house to pick up the finished shoes they made," said Corey, who kept the hidden treasure during renovations of the fence.

The Alden family remained in the house until 1934 when Frederick Jones Alden sold it on his mother's behalf.

a short distance away along Washington Street which is now Batelle Labs.

Joseph Jr. and Almira raised three sons, Henry, Joseph III, and Wilbur, and each one was born in the Joseph Brewster Jr. house.

When the cape was first built it had a small ell off the back, which was later replaced with a larger ell during a 1920s renovation, said Richards.

The unusual thing about this house is the location of the original kitchen. It is not located in the center or back of the home but rather on the side, noted Richards. This keeping room with large fireplace and remnants of a beehive stove was shortened during renovations in order to change the front stairwell. Molding has been added to one side of the hearth area to hide the old bricks. The ceiling of the keeping room reveals rows of beautiful beams and at the ceiling corners one can still see the original wood pegs jutting out. Eventually Joseph Jr.

parsonage.

"For 15 years, from 1870 to 1885, the house served as a home for the ministers of the Methodist Church farther along Washington Street," said Richards. This church is now known as the Pilgrim Congregational Church.

Eventually misfortune met with this Brewster family. Their son Joseph III ended up living in the poor house for about three years. Joseph Jr., his father, went to live with one of his other sons in Rockland in 1887, where he died the same year at age 82 by "hanging by his own hands," noted Richards.

Joseph Brewster, Jr. had been born into a shipwright family- the sea was his life's work, his way of providing for his sons and wife. His story ends tragically, but his well-constructed cape cod home on Surplus Street remains forever a symbol of a hardworking, seafaring man, and is a tribute to the woman he built it for in 1828, the love of his life, Almira.

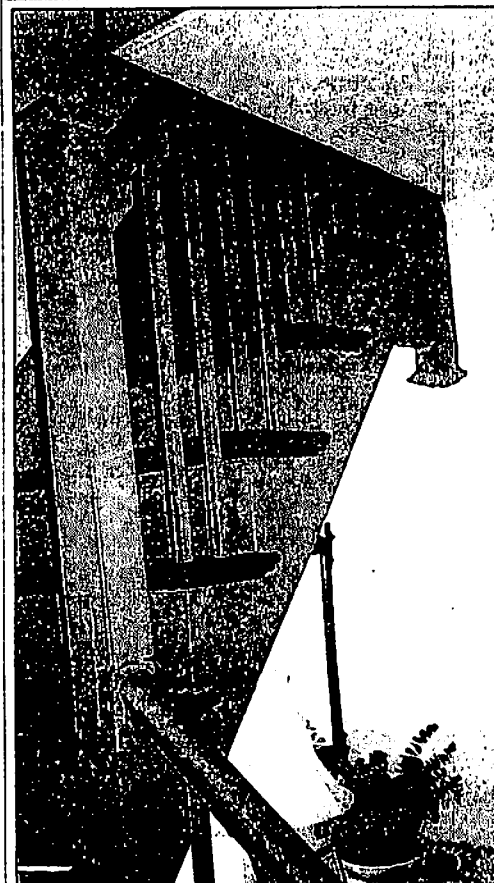
Next in our series, we will visit a unique historical house and discover how the town survived the decline of the shipbuilding industry through the ingenuity of its residents.

obtained title to his house and land after his father's death in 1847 when he paid his siblings \$450 for ownership in the property.

In 1848, Joseph Brewster Jr., along with his siblings, sold some land next to Joseph's house to the town for the purpose of a schoolhouse. This became known as the Village School, which served the area's children and operated from 1848 to 1884. The site of the school was on property currently owned by the Cutler family, but the building itself was moved to what is now Western Way.

Life continued on for this seafaring, hard working family. Joseph and Almira's boys all grew up and moved away. Then in 1867, Almira died of pneumonia, at the age of 63. Joseph Jr. remained in the house he had built for his family for another two years before deciding to sell the property to George Curtis for \$900.

Curtis sold the house for \$1100 the following year to the Methodist Church for a



Hinge on main post of this stairwell inside the Joseph Brewster, Jr. House was installed to enable furniture to fit up the stairs.

PHOTO BY DEBRA KATZ